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ABSTRACT

If teacher education is to train second language teachers to be principled practitioners, it is essential to resist the attraction of panaceas and recipe-type solutions to instructional problems, and to promote teachers' better understanding of what constitutes successful language learning. Second language acquisition (SLA) research, both applied and theoretical, can play an important role in this process, particularly in the areas of interlanguage and errors, learning vs. acquisition, and learning styles and learning strategies. The SLA component in the training program can be presented in the form of basic training in classroom research or incorporated into an experiential learning cycle in either pre-service or in-service training. In the latter case, trainers play a mediating role. However, teachers and researchers must cooperate to turn theory into practice. Teacher trainers can supply both learners, needed as subjects by researchers, and ideas for useful research; researchers can provide research results to be translated into classroom practice. Such collaboration requires that trainers and researchers understand each others' terminology, possibly through an intermediate literature that makes research accessible to classroom teachers. In addition, more teacher training material on SLA is needed. (MSE)

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A PLACE FOR SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION IN TEACHER DEVELOPMENT AND IN TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAMMES

Rod Bolitho

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A PLACE FOR SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION IN TEACHER DEVELOPMENT AND IN TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAMMES

Rod Bolitho

Any discussion of the relevance of Second Language Acquisition studies to teacher training programmes needs to take place within the broader context of the uneasy relationship between theory and practice in general, and between Applied Linguistics and English language teaching in particular. This relationship has long been a matter of concern to those involved in teacher education. Various attempts to define it have appeared in recent years Brumfit and Rossner (1982) discuss it in terms of decision-making, Widdowson's (1984) view takes the form of a homily, and a teacher training perspective is offered in Bolitho (1987). Ramani (1987) offers a route which leads teachers from their own practices towards a relevant 'theory'. Teachers often take up extreme positions, either deferring totally to theory or rejecting it out of hand as irrelevant to classroom issues. A position which many trainers seem to have arrived at and found useful, is that teachers need to understand why certain things work or don't work in classrooms and why materials writers and syllabus designers take certain decisions. 'Theory' may provide a part of the answer to some of those questions, though we cannot always be sure. What is certain however, is that one very worthwhile aim in teacher education is to turn out 'principled practitioners': teachers capable of asking the right questions and keeping the answers they may get from theory in a robust perspective of their own. Such a perspective is all the more necessary given the confusion and disagreement about research findings and language teaching theories in recent years. All too often, as Krashen (1989) points out, theorists have 'failed to deliver' and have, in the process, lost the respect of language teachers.

Yet there are dangers there for all to see. Applied Linguistics is, in many parts of the world, establishing itself as a kind of parent discipline to language teaching. Many applied linguists are involved in the training of teachers of English, and the pursuit of linguistic theory and research is all too often seen as a higher order activity than teaching. The more readily teachers acquiesce in this implied power structure, the more likely it is that theorists and researchers will attempt to set the agenda for classroom practice.

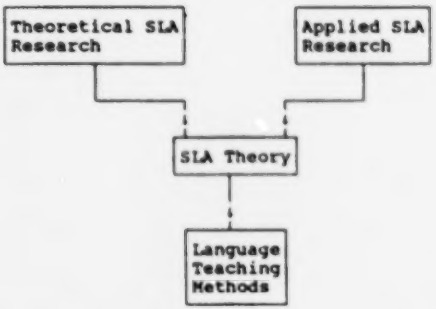
Conferences and seminars such as this one at RELC in 1991 can often contribute, unwittingly to the perpetuation of this kind of hierarchy. When researchers are given a platform to report their findings to an audience consisting largely of teachers, they carry a great burden of responsibility. It is all too easy to 'blind an audience with science' and to reveal research findings which are often derived from contexts quite alien to the majority of the listeners. The difficulties involved in carrying out large scale second language acquisition projects mean that many studies are limited to small groups of learners in well-defined and sometimes privileged learning situations. Teachers listen in awed silence to papers presented by researchers who are clearly expert in their own field, and the terms on which they can understand are defined by the speakers, not by the listeners. The 'code' which Second Language Acquisitionists have established to facilitate peer communication is not readily comprehensible to outsider groups, such as teachers. Very few teachers are versed in the methodology of research at any level. Yet we are all in the business of communication, and the onus is surely on researchers, as it is on specialists in any field, to find ways of describing their work to a lay audience with a legitimate interest in it. The reading of academic papers, for example, may be appropriate in a closed peer group, where everyone accepts it as a convention, and decoding presents no problems. In a conference where the audience is mixed, it simply results in miscommunication or even total alienation. When teachers and theorists or researchers meet, it should be an opportunity for genuine dialogue between professionals of equal standing. Teachers should not come away from such an encounter feeling guilty (about what they don't know), belittled, alienated or devalued. A decision to attend a conference or seminar is, after all, usually not taken lightly, and underlying it is the expectation that the event will contribute to one's professional development, though it may be wrong to expect solutions to problems or classroom recipes from such events. In this connection teachers and trainers will do well to remember that language teaching has a documented history stretching back, according to Kelly (1969) for 25 centuries whereas Second Language Acquisition has been recognised as a discipline for barely 25 years (though there have, of course, been many theories of language acquisition over the centuries). Surely such accumulated classroom experience is worth something!

Teacher educators, too, have a perspective on seminars of this sort, and on theories of Second Language Acquisition. This is a field which has had a considerable impact on language teaching in recent years, largely through the popular appeal of Krashen's ideas. His 'input hypothesis' and 'monitor model', allied to his views on learners' errors presented persuasively not only in print (Krashen 1982) but also on television, to mass audiences, demanded our attention

since they seemed to have obvious implications for classroom practice. Many teachers found his notions of 'comprehensible input' and errors as 'stepping stones on the way to learning' to be relevant and attractive. Indeed, these ideas, partly realised in Asher's 'Total Physical Response' Method, described in Asher (1969), formed the basis of a major national teacher training project in Indonesia (see Tomlinson 1990 for a full account). The prominence accorded to Krashen's ideas understandably led to criticism, too. Not everyone was so easily persuaded, and intuitive doubts were expressed at a very early stage (see , for example, Lowe 1983), to be followed later by more carefully elaborated positions (see, for example, Ellis 1985). Most of the objections are to the speculative nature of Krashen's ideas, which are not grounded in research. Those concerned with the education or training of language teachers need to decide how these arguments and counter-arguments can best be presented to teachers and trainee teachers who are primarily concerned with classroom-level decisions. In short, they have to decide how and in what measure to refer to Second Language Acquisition in teacher education programmes.

In a later book, Krashen (1989) refers to the relationship between research and practice with the help of a diagram which is reproduced here (Fig. 1)

Figure 1



from Krashen (1989:46)

He argues the case for the theorist (himself, for example!) as a mediator between research findings and classroom practice. (It is fair to state that he recognises there are many other areas of enquiry which inform language teaching apart from Second Language Acquisition, and that teachers' own insights and intuitions are of value.) But his diagram is based on a 'top-down' view (look at the arrows!) and takes no obvious account of the ways in which teacher educators also have to mediate between research findings and theory on the one hand, and classroom practice on the other. Those other areas of enquiry (linguistics, lexicography, humanistic psychology etc) are important to language teacher educators, and Second Language Acquisition has to take its place among them on a crowded teacher education syllabus. In the light of this, a legitimate question is: which areas of Second Language Acquisition should we focus on in our programmes, where time is so limited? For the time being the following areas seem relevant to both initial and in-service programmes, partly because of the attention they have attracted, and partly because they have clearly identifiable practical implications:

- interlanguage and errors
- learning vs acquisition
- learning styles and learning strategies (though Second Language Acquisition research is only one piece in the jigsaw here)

In addition, on some in-service programmes, where the focus is on continuing professional development, it seems appropriate to broach the issue of classroom research, though here again, Second Language Acquisition is only one possible area on which to focus attention.

Having decided which aspects of Second Language Acquisition to include in the course, the teacher educator needs to decide how to present them and (in many cases) who should present them. Taking the latter question first, and given the problems outlined earlier in this paper over teachers' relationship with research, I would like to advance the view that those engaged in research are not always best equipped to teach in their own discipline area on training courses. It may seem exciting to study in a research-oriented unit where frontiers are being pushed back, but it is not necessarily healthy for teachers and trainees. Indeed, there are many good reasons why the language teaching profession should not react too quickly to research findings. Changes in syllabus, materials and methods, if perceived as being top-down and too frequent, cause difficulty and even distress for learners and teacher alike. The natural 'home' of Second Language Acquisition research work is

in Departments of Linguistics or Psychology, whereas most teacher training is rightly carried out in Faculties or Colleges of Education.

It is, however, all too easy, in many institutions, for those running training courses to assume that the only way to deal with Second Language Acquisition is to 'buy in' the services of a specialist who may then find it difficult to present the subject in an accessible way. The alternative is for the trainer (whose main Language Acquisition studies into the course. This places the onus on trainers to keep reasonably up to date with research findings through the literature, and to interpret them for the purposes of their trainees. Trainers may also wish to provide their trainees with a basic grounding in classroom research, in order to empower them to conduct their own investigations when the need arises. I believe this mediating role to be vitally important if practitioners' 'blocks' about research are to be overcome, and if practical concerns are to be successfully articulated to researchers.

The other question ('how to deal with a Second Language Acquisition component on a training course') is then rather easier to answer. Many trainers are aware of the value of building on the existing experience of their trainees as a starting point from which theoretical issues can be approached. Indeed, it has often been stated that most teachers and learners have their own 'theory' of language learning, usually more implicit than explicit. Part of a trainer's responsibility is to encourage trainees to articulate this 'theory'.

Using this as a basis, trainers can consider an approach which integrates SLA work into an experiential learning cycle such as the one illustrated in Fig. 2., derived from models proposed by Gibbs and Habeshaw (1989) and Dennison and Kirk (1990) (though there are other similar models elsewhere in the literature of pedagogy).

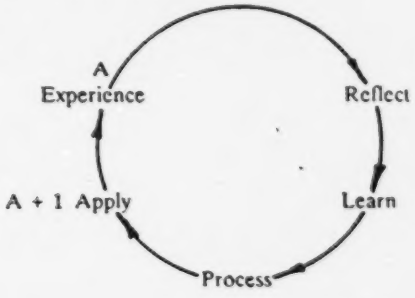


Fig. 2

In an INSET session on Errors and Interlanguage, for example, the trainer might start by asking teachers to describe their attitudes to learners' errors and their current classroom practices. Teachers could be encouraged to compare their practices with those of colleagues (i.e. reflecting on their own experience). The trainer would then summarise key issues and unresolved questions before asking trainees to read a couple of accessible extracts from teachers' handbooks, e.g. Edge (1989) or Corder (1981) or from background literature, e.g. Krashen (1982) (the learning stage). Teachers could then be asked to reassess their own attitudes and practices in the light of this new input (the 'processing' stage, much of which may happen after the course), thereby arriving at a new position which they will go on to apply in their own classrooms. So they will have absorbed useful insights from SLA which will have played a part in moving them from their original position (A in the diagram) to a revised position (A + 1 in the diagram). This may entail a revised attitude to the treatment of learners' errors based on an enhanced understanding of their status and significance. In arriving at this new position, they have had their own views heard and respected, and have been encouraged not to abandon them completely but to modify them where appropriate in the light of the interpreted research findings. Appendix One consists of a training sequence based on this approach. On a pre-service course, a similar approach could be taken, using the trainees' views of error as language learners as the experiential starting point. In either case, the model allows theory and research findings to be assimilated digestibly into the overall methodology of training courses and to be kept in sensible perspective.

If trainers are to play this kind of mediating role successfully, and if teachers and researchers are to develop a healthy and sensible working relationship, certain conditions will have to be met.

1. To start with, Krashen's diagram could usefully be modified (as in fig. 3) to imply two-way dialogue rather than one-way transmission, and to take account of insights from other fields. Researchers often call for co-operation from teachers, whose learners are needed as subjects of research, and they frequently urge teachers to give attention to their findings. They have no particular right to expect this of teachers unless they are prepared to listen as well. It is as legitimate for teachers to make demands on researchers (e.g. by helping to establish a research agenda) as it is for researchers to influence what goes on in classrooms. Teacher trainers, many of whom spend a fair amount of time observing in classrooms, may have a useful perspective to offer here, too. An example might be useful.

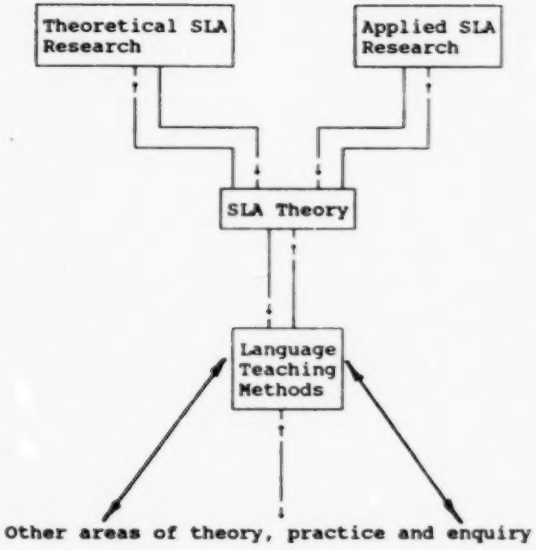
Teachers, particularly in a region like S.E. Asia, understandably get weary of hearing the results of small-scale SLA studies carried out in classroom contexts which are almost totally unrecognisable to them. Is it really unreasonable to ask researchers to turn their attention to larger scale studies in underprivileged classrooms?

2. Successful two-way communication depends on mutual comprehensibility. Most teachers talk in terms that researchers can readily understand. Many researchers have become used to talking in terms which are only comprehensible to other researchers. The register of research is remote and inaccessible to many teachers. The onus here is on researchers. When invited to address conference and seminar audiences consisting largely of teachers, they need to present their ideas in an accessible way, in terms which will make sense to teachers. It simply will not do to give the same paper as they gave at the last specialist SLA conference in the same way.

3. Following on from this, there is a point to be made about literature. Comparatively few books on SLA are written in terms that teachers can readily understand. Krashen (1989), Ellis (1985) and, with some reservations, Littlewood (1984) are notable exceptions. In such a fast-developing area (in which we hear that Krashen's theories, for example, are already 'old hat'), there is a need for regular 'state-of-the-art' publication in non-intimidating language, to allow all those with a legitimate interest in ideas from research to assess them on their own terms. If researchers wish to be taken seriously outside their limited circuit, they will have to take responsibility for producing this kind of intermediate literature, which teacher trainers need if they are to deal with SLA successfully on their courses.

4. There is a crying need for more teacher training material in the field of SLA. Selinker and Gass (1984), now sadly out of print, is an example of immediately usable training material on the form of awareness-raising tasks based on samples of learner language. Trainers need banks of this type of task-based material, both for class use and for self-access purposes. A fruitful joint project for a trainer and a researcher, perhaps?

Figure 3



If our aim in teacher education is to train our trainees, pre-service and in-service, to be 'principled practitioners', we need to help them to ask the right questions, to arrive at a better understanding of the whys and wherefores of successful language learning, to resist the attractions of panaceas and recipe-type solutions, and to lay the foundations for continuing professional development. If SLA researchers are to claim a role on this valuable process, they must understand how best to play it. Trainers need principled support, not confusing messages from the world of research.

It has been the purpose of this paper to identify and discuss some of the causes of such confusion and to attempt to describe the kind of support which might be most useful.

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